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Mataco Marriage

By Niels Fock

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The Mataco Indians inhabit the western areas of the Argentine Chaco between the Rio Pilcomayo and the Rio Bermejo. They have for centuries been in contact with civilisation, but as a frontier tribe they seem to have built up a special traditionalism as a protective bulwark. Particularly the north-eastern Mataco at the central Pilcomayo have preserved their ancient traditions to this day, and the occupational system is still stamped by the collecting by women and the fishing of the men. The customs in connexion with marriage have to a large extent been retained unaffected to the present day, evincing many primitive features as, for example, the lack of any form of wedding ceremony. The contraction of marriage extends over a period dating from the girl's initiation until her first confinement.

The Mataco regard the initiation of girls as an introduction to marriage. This initiation consists in the girl's seclusion—or better—segregation from everyone apart from her mother. It comes as a prolongation of her first menstruation, and the long isolation is spent in continual work making *caraguatá* cord. It is considered very important that this work should be performed rapidly and well in order that an impression can be formed of the girl's ability as regards her main occupation in the future. As a rule the end of seclusion is marked by an *aleja* festival during which the girl looks around for a man. That same night she is able to take him with her to her home and allow him to sleep with her.

The girl being initiated is then called *anutsha;* sexually and economically she is now ready for marriage. Normally several years will pass during which the girl may well search for a husband, but the actual result of her efforts is a series of sexual relations that seldom endure beyond a few days. It is nearly always the girl who takes the initiative for these short term adventures. At the village dancing-place where every evening the young men dance in chains or rings, the girls also

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